

Wednesday, 18/6/97

First of three days working on Leskernick. Really looking forward to it: on an immediate level, it is a chance to get into the field after weeks in the office writing up. But it is also an increasingly rare opportunity to look closely at an area, and discuss it, as the prime aim of the activity rather than as something whose time has to be argued for and excused as necessary to producing scheduling proposals.

A couple of apprehensive aspects too: one over whether the trapped nerve in my leg will stay sufficiently in the background not to interfere with what I need to do; the other over how I shall mesh with the group already working at Leskernick. On 'meshing' I am conscious, probably too conscious, that by the time I join them, they will have been working together for long enough to have developed a sense of group identity to which I will inevitably be an outsider coming in, only for a brief time, and even worse after Sue's intro at the caravan site, with the tag of a EH Inspector (which I am not) and with an excellent knowledge of the moor (which does not really extend to Leskernick). I felt bound to be seen as a member of another tribe who has been set on a pedestal, not a good recipe for finding easy acceptance socially, or for my inputs being received simply as offerings for discussion and debate along with everyone else's. I always feel very uncomfortable when cast as some sort of 'authority', as I think Sue (probably unwittingly) did when introducing me, and hope it will not hinder my ability to take part as an equal in the open discussion of models and interpretation that I think is an important part of this project's ethic. I spend much of my time challenging the views of 'authorities' on various theories and sites, and believe that the concept of the 'authoritative individual', whose words are too uncritically respected by others, acts as a clamp on debate and innovative theorising, often leading to egotistical behaviour by the authoritative individuals and the formation of cliques around them. Unfortunately archaeology is rife with 'authorities' and those who strive to be such, reflecting the state of the subject's development and the opportunities for patronage that result from its limited and skewed finance and the small number of individuals working in it.

Enough of my hopes and fears; what actually happened? I got to the camp site at 8.05 am - no sign of life; oh no, they've gone already and I don't know which moorgate they set off from! Try wandering among the caravans and see if I can see anyone or be seen. Bit disconcerting really, rather like a game of battleships: if I look into the wrong caravan I'll probably get a bunch of tourists looking affronted - the English generally pretend not to notice their fellow man (or woman) or their residences, even when the ground around is stuffed with them. Great, found some kindly bleary-eyed students moving slowly in a caravan - told me they had had a party last night and were a little later than usual. I know how they feel but that's only because I got up at 6 am. They point me towards Chris's caravan, called there and found he was in St Ives, then got spotted by Barbara in another caravan. Interesting dispersed community this. Had a very welcome coffee; now where shall we start? We chat about lynchets - real can of worms and lots of ideas but no time to explore them - the students have to leave pretty soon and Barbara will not be around till Friday.

I take three students over to Westmoorgate in the car; they are really friendly and hopefully my apprehensions over being accepted on an equal footing are unfounded. On the way we talk about tor cairns, neolithic hilltop enclosures, Scilly - again lots of thoughts and good discussion but too little time and too many distractions (trying to develop discussion points while driving down a single track road gets unnerving at times). Begin to hope that at some point during my stay there will be an opportunity to sit down for a more prolonged discussion instead of just snapshots. Drove round a corner and startled a buzzard on the road which dropped the shrew it had just caught - really spectacular and brought us all out of our discussion cloud and back to the beauty of where we actually are. At Westmoorgate the other three set off for Leskernick while I change

into my wellies. 'I'm sure you'll catch us up' was called to me. I did eventually, but they looked wrapped in their own conversation so I went on past. About halfway to Leskernick, the previously mild aching in my leg was getting much more noticeable and accompanied marked stiffening - not noticed that before - I was getting the first twinges of doubt over whether this was wise. But it seems less severe going uphill than downhill and this would probably be the most prolonged bout of continuous walking until I return to Westmoorgate at the end of the day, so I'll probably be OK once I get to site and the more intermittent movements involved.

Arrived at house 39 excavation; crouched down while Sue debated, mostly with Mike, where best to section the wall running from the house entrance. Feel much better - the aching stopped while I sit down and don't want to mention it - that's not what I am here for and I don't want to gain attention/sympathy for that reason. Find myself feeling really irritated by Mike's attitude that it doesn't matter where the wall is sectioned because you will not detect the relationship between the wall, its tumble and the laid slabs emerging from the house entrance. Why not!! We found similar relationships on Holne Moor, looking carefully at which slabs sealed peat, which lay on or in the E horizon; which formed contiguous aggregations of slabs and which were looser groups with larger interstices. If Mike really thinks that, how is he making decisions over on his excavation area? I make a brief comment to Sue giving optimism that such relationships may well be detectable but feel I don't want to give chapter and verse - apart from being downright untactful (Mike would see it as a snub to his opinion and I got the feeling from his 'resigned posturing' that Mike doesn't like being crossed) - I also feel in a cleft stick: I don't want to come over as a self-appointed expert or 'authority' trying to talk down from experience, yet it is just that experience on excavating round houses in almost identical soil types for which my contribution at Leskernick is valued. I find this paradox is a frequent problem personally; if I say something based on my own experience, I am content if that information is bounced around in discussion and either used, built upon, or rejected. As far as I am concerned, I have then made my contribution as I want to and have been asked to; my motives really are altruistic towards the project in that sense and I have nothing to gain by being otherwise. But I am also well aware that individuals offer information for many reasons, notably to try and impress with their knowledge (usually failing to do so) and to further their personal status within a social group or to impress a group leader (sometimes succeeding, at least in the world of one well-known archaeological quango). I think my own problem is that I am overcompensating for not wanting to be thought of as an outsider coming in for a few days pretending to know all the answers (which I certainly don't).

Back to the real world; Sue asks what I think of the area taken down to the rab in the north of the house interior; looks really interesting and the level is mostly just below the main vole run level - really reminiscent of Holne Moor. One possible post-hole visible, and what is that deep E-filled hollow in the rab in the northern section? But the surface is badly trampled; suggest a cleaning scrape then stop to mark possible features and spoon them out - I feel like a tape-loop that hasn't been switched on for ten years. I start the clean alongside Gary, and later Helen. Now this is really good - it is far, far, too long (six years in fact) since I have actually been in the field trowelling to identify features; OK its not what I am paid to do any more but even though I do far more fieldwork than the average archaeologist on a permanent contract these days, the lack of any capacity within my job to follow up by excavation some of the questions and theories that my observations throw up is really very frustrating. But there is also the social dimension too; as doubtless the project sociologists will know from their work, there is a distinctive social atmosphere I feel on an upland dig (and not just after beans for breakfast). It really is a personal feeling of contentment with what I am doing (yes, even in the pouring rain), I cannot really define it or explain it - I'll leave that for the sociologists - but its probably a combination of shared interest and activity with people I have hardly or never met before, in a very moving, often dramatic, landscape and frequently in arduous conditions, whether of blazing heat, dense fog and drizzle or horizontal rain backed by a gale.

Gary and Helen are easy-going and good to talk to - I certainly feel accepted here; we talk of voles and their habits: I decide not to let them know how lucky they are not to have had to dig out several metres of similar vole runs as we did on Holne Moor; Andrew Fleming always maintained that some at least were the product of prehistoric moles; I think the peaty fill of those at Leskernick argues against that here, certainly for those I have seen so far.

The conversation turned to recent visit by the geomorphologist. To me, this brought out an interesting paradox in the project's thinking. Among the project's team there is an explicit desire to debate ideas and interpretation openly and critically, to recognise the influence of one's own cultural baggage in one's thinking, and to try to get away from the strongly hierarchical regime that still prevails in most archaeological activity. It is one of the project's aspects with which I feel most in sympathy. Yet when presented with the need to seek the views of a specialist in another field, in this case periglacial geomorphology, that open and critical approach seems to go out of the window and the views of the specialist seem to be accepted as 'God's wisdom', an input to the debate whose own assumptions are not open to question. I must say that the best evidence for this came from Chris himself when I questioned the premisses on which the geomorphologist was making firm statements as to what was due to periglacial activity and what was deliberately moved by people. Chris emphasised the man's considerable experience in periglacial studies. Other members of the team also stated how good it is to recognise just how much stone had been deliberately moved and wasn't just due to preglacial clitter flows. This may indeed be true but who is going to seriously question the bases of that opinion? Surely their uncritical acceptance of what the geomorphologist says is driven by the fact that he is saying what they want to hear. Where is the discarding of cultural baggage now - this same problem of uncritical reliance on specialists making the right noises has dogged archaeology from the 'crippled Neanderthals' and the Piltdown forgery onwards. When a geomorphologist makes a statement about what is and isn't the result of non-human processes, he/she is making an archaeological statement as much as a geomorphological one and needs to be examined as critically as one would any other member of the archaeological team. I feel the fundamental problem is that most specialists have gained their understandings outside any relationship with archaeology and when asked to comment on something that crosses their disciplinary boundary with archaeology, they are presented with a new situation and novel questions as much as we are. The obvious tendency is to try and fit the answers into models already familiar to the specialist, but being a new situation this may not be appropriate - who will know? Not the specialist, confident of his/her own field and experience elsewhere, nor the archaeologist, unconfident of the specialist's field. In these circumstances, I feel it is the more vital to have specialist's statements underpinned explicitly by the assumptions and premisses on which they are based so they can be subject to the same critical debate as the archaeologists' statements.

At morning tea break, I follow the others to house 28; on the walk over, the aching in my leg becomes pretty severe; begin to feel a bit like Quasimodo. But again when I get there and sit down it quickly calms down. Chris asks if I can wander around checking for lynchets later - I think to myself I should be OK as it will involve walking broken up by sitting on rocks taking notes. He asks if I have anything more to do on the excavation so I explain it would be useful if I carry on till lunch picking out features and spooning them out - I wonder if Sue told him about our conversation on the intro evening, when we agreed to divide my first day between the excavation in the morning and the survey in the afternoon. It may not apply in this case, but I can envisage that the more you loosen the hierarchy on a project the more vital it is to ensure that there is good communication between the team members about what is going on, otherwise the usual misconceptions and irritations are bound to develop between people who thought agreed arrangements were other than what they turn out to be.

Back to the house; what looks like two largish post-holes, a very large possible post-hole with packing stones, and a scatter of possible stake-holes. Gary and I mark these and start spooning, both of us saving the most promising looking features till last - the carrot that keeps us going!



Good job too; all the 'stake holes' turn out to be very slight humic or E-filled blind hollows in the rab, probably the bases of vole runs and/or root channels. One 'post-hole' was very shallow and dived off to the side, merging with a clear vole run and appeared to be simply part of the run with slightly more rab flacks in its fill - probably due to partial collapse when it was filling up. A nearby post-hole looked more promising, very shallow but with good circularity and vertical sides - Gary was clearly very pleased it was generally felt to be 'real' as opposed to 'vole'. I felt rather spoilt by having the possible post-hole with packing stones to half-section. It quickly became apparent that it was fulfilling its promise and it had charcoal flecks in the silty fill, so I put the fill in sample bags. No-one has introduced me to the excavation's recording system so I ensure that apart from the obvious features - location, shape, etc that can be recorded up later, Sue also knows about the possible contamination by a vole run that passes through the southern sector of the post hole. Finished taking its fill out by lunchtime: looks good, very similar in size, depth and packing stones to the ring beam posts in House A, Site B, on Holne Moor, and about on the right line within the wall to be from a ring-beam post, but if so, one might expect another in the north of the opened area and there is no sign. That ends my morning on the excavation and I lurch over to house 28 for lunch - my leg really is painful but I don't want to stop now, and as I thought earlier, I should be able to cope with the stop/start activity of lynchets and feature spotting. On the way to the house, I see one of the sociologists and ask him if there were any allotted sites for a pee. He said no, people choose any site they feel appropriate - but that his resulting piss-map was very interesting. I'll bet it would be even more interesting to see how it changes with the prevailing wind (and does pee-slab height vary with leg length in men but show no significant correlation in women???). What avenues of thought this takes one down.

Over lunch I sort out with Chris how he wants the lynchets recording. Not a lot of social chat evident among the lunchtime gathering - for which I am as responsible as anyone else. After lunch I set off, thinking the southern settlement would be a good target for completion over the afternoon. As often, the initial question is what strategy to adopt to achieve one's end. I decide to focus on checking for lynchets along the mapped walls first, picking up other obvious features within fields and along walls as I notice them but leaving intensive overall coverage for other features for a second trawl over the area. The aching leg really is beginning to dominate thoughts, as is the prospect of the walk back to Westmoorgate at the end of the day. Out of sheer discomfort I resort to a strategy of walking a few metres at a time then sitting on a slab and viewing the walling to each side of me. It soon occurred to me that this largely enforced method is probably more effective at picking up lynchet detail than my normal method, which is walking the walls, map in hand, and noting what I saw as I walked. Sitting down to view and take notes made me look from a much lower level across the slope profile than I usually do; comparing views a few times with my normal standing position confirmed that from the seated viewpoint very slight lynchets were much more evident than from standing up - obvious with hindsight perhaps, but so are many things that people don't normally try until circumstances force them. Checking for lynchets also brought back home many of the things that had been bugging me about interpreting what we call a 'lynchet' - a step in the slope profile from one side to another of an early boundary, and how, if at all, we can identify positive from negative lynchetting, what their origin is, etc - what we had touched on at the start of the day over coffee in Barbara's caravan. I've had the similar problems on Scilly where there are many very marked 'lynchets' involving steps of 1m or more in circumstances where the present 'normal' soil depth is quite shallow [I've done some notes for Chris with my current thoughts on the subject to accompany my 'neat' plan of the southern settlement lynchets so I'll not repeat that here, but it is a subject that needs much more thought and a methodology working out].

After the afternoon tea-break, it really starts to rain - I don't really mind that while working on my own, which is very much the norm for me; I just batten down the hatches on the waterproofs and carry on, the main problem being the fact that one's map and note paper can easily turn to pulp. It's easy to get miserable when part of a group working through bad weather: everyone swaps gripes and the group morale can dive into a depressive cycle, but on a personal level I

actually feel it can be quite comforting working alone in heavy rain - not in any sort of masochistic sense, but feeling snug and secure in the midst of fairly violent weather, a bit like winning out in a challenge (and I like dramatic weather just as I like dramatic landscapes - all part of the same thing to my mind). I'll probably be thought of as downright perverse now!

About 4 o'clock, Sue came over to let me know that people would start packing up about 5-ish and that the students would go back in the van. I was quite pleased as with my leg feeling as it was, I really didn't fancy the drive over to Camelford and then back home. The weather got steadily worse and about 4.30 I noticed the excavation team packing up; by then I had completed the lynchet check over the southern settlement and felt it a good time to pack up too. On the way down the hill, I took a couple of photos of the (damp) excavation in case I didn't make it back the next day. The leg was aching and tingling as though it had a cord wrapped around the top of it, and I thought that if it didn't improve overnight I may have to see the doctor about it again.

The walk back to Westmoorgate convinced me. Normally I would do that with no problem. This time my left foot and lower leg became numb, dragging rather than lifting at each step, coupled with really severe aching at my hip. The back-pain had practically disappeared so I was getting worried as to what was now going on. I felt awful; I knew then I really couldn't come out to site the next day and I had a feeling of let-down to the project that I had offered to assist. And obviously I was very concerned about my leg and the increasing restriction that had developed over the day affecting my mobility on which I rely for my employment and for so much of my enjoyment out of life. To say I was feeling a sense of crisis as well as pain when I got to Westmoorgate is an understatement! I explained the problem to Chris before getting into the car; I hadn't really broached the problem much before that but he was very understanding, which I appreciated. I used the mobile to arrange a doctor's appointment the next day and waited about half an hour before realising my foot was getting no feeling back, so I drove back, clogging my whole leg onto the clutch pedal when I needed to change gear. Good job I didn't have the students with me! So ended a day's work which left me with about the most mixed feelings from a single experience that I can remember - interesting, stimulating, fulfilling, painful, disappointed (with myself), worried.